

Weekend Post
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NEWS

From dusty Qunu to Big Apple

Madiba's birthplace also origin of science-fiction writer now based in US

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SAY the name "Qunu" to any South African and he will immediately tell you this is where Nelson Mandela was born. Tell them it is also the birthplace of a world-renowned science-fiction writer, and the response is very different indeed.

However there is nothing dubious about Ken Sibanda and his rise as a short film director, author and lawyer from the dusty plains of the small Eastern Cape village to the bright lights of New York.

When he left South Africa with his heart set on becoming a movie director, sceptics thought he was

crazy. Years later, his track record speaks for itself with his latest achievement being the science-fiction novel *The Return to Gibraltar*.

Sibanda was inspired to write by his father's collection of Time magazines. "I think I owe more than I realise to my father's keen reading sense," said the author who spent the first four years of his life in Qunu, to which Mandela has returned to live with wife Graca Machel.

"I am happy I share something in common with Nelson Mandela and he has inspired me to follow what I am passionate about," said Sibanda, who met the former president twice in the 1990s – once in Johannesburg and again in New York.

A litigation lawyer with a law de-

gree from the University of London and a Masters in Law from the Temple School of Law in America, he started writing when he was a teenager growing up in Zimbabwe, and published two collections of poetry about democratic change in South Africa called *If God was a Poet* and *Songs of Soweto: Poems from a Post Apartheid South Africa* by the time he was 21.

The law degrees were a "plan B" strategy for the young author.

"When I left Mzansi because I wanted to become a movie director everyone thought I was crazy. (Being a lawyer) really helps because in the film industry you have to know how to protect creative content.

"I do per diem work now because

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the film work keeps me so busy, but eventually I will have to hang up my boots as a lawyer and concentrate solely on directing," said Sibanda, who has appeared as an extra in director Ridley Scott's *American Gangster* starring Denzel Washington.

A visit to the Philadelphia Museum of Art where he admired a painting called *The Moorish Chief* inspired him to write the recently published *The Return to Gibraltar* in which an African American man

called Horace Bates travels back in time to 1491 to help the Moors of Spain against advancing Christian campaigns.

"I wrote the book with the intention that it would one day be a movie and throughout the book I could see Will Smith playing Horace Bates. But I am open to a South African knocking on my door when it gets to that stage," said Sibanda, who is currently pre-producing a movie about Hannibal Barca, the general who invaded Rome.

Although his life is firmly entrenched in the US, Sibanda still has relatives in Qunu and feels a strong affinity for the village of his birth.

